



San Francisco Bay Area Federal Executive Board

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A Coast Guard boat crew searches for survivors in a flooded New Orleans home. Over 33,000 persons were rescued by the service.

Coast Guard Plays Big Role in Katrina Rescue Operations

Eleventh District seaman returns to duty station but is ready to go back to the Gulf Coast

ALAMEDA, CA -- U.S. Coast Guard Seaman Chris Howell recently returned from a three-week tour of duty in New Orleans where he provided support for Hurricane Katrina relief operations. Due to his prior experience and training, he was put in charge of a boat and crew and searched for survivors in some of the hardest hit neighborhoods of the city.

Boat missions began at dawn and lasted 14 to 16 hours. Despite the long hours, Howell remarked that a sense of compassion and teamwork pervaded relief operations. "Everybody was looking for a way to pitch in," said Howell, assigned to Coast Guard Station Monterey. "People were wanting to help any way they could."

Howell recalled one evening in September when the Coast Guard received 60 new boats that needed to have outboard engines mounted. "It didn't matter that we had just finished a long day on the water or that none of us had done this before. Everybody put their skills together and we had the job done in a couple hours." While the pace of the operation was grueling, Howell indicated he wished he could go back, "This is what I joined the Coast Guard for, to help people."

While boat operations were led by Coast Guard personnel, boat crews represented a cross-section of participating agencies. Firefighters from Nevada and California provided expertise in entering damaged buildings, and armed members of the Louisiana National Guard provided security.

In addition to battling heat and dehydration, crews had to contend with armed looters, toxic smoke and heavily polluted flood waters. Howell recalled run-ins with looters who would take "pot-shots" at rescue crews. In spite of these hardships, Howell estimated that he and his crew alone rescued at least 50 people. In all, the Coast Guard saved over 33,000 lives in the aftermath of Katrina.